

Civil War Action
In the Yorktown Area

*from Park
Library
Probably written
by their
historian*

The Siege of Yorktown in 1781, the climactic battle of the American Revolution, is the event that gave Yorktown its mark of great historic interest in our national story. It was for this reason that the area was made a National Historical Park in 1930. In most respects the events of 1781 far overshadow the Civil War operations in this same area. These latter, in 1862, while of considerable interest, are actually minor when viewed against the backdrop of the tragic struggle between the Confederacy and the Union.

A map, especially one of eastern Virginia, and a beginning knowledge of the Civil War, are requisites to the study of the Peninsular Campaign of 1862 of which Yorktown was a part. The Peninsula, embraced by the York and James, was and still is a major approach to Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. The dawn of the war's second year found the Peninsula, except Fort Monroe at its tip, in Confederate hands. President Lincoln's government believed that the fall of Richmond would mean the collapse of the Confederacy and the preservation of the Union. There was, however, dissension in the selection of an invasion route. Lincoln favored a direct attack from the vicinity of Washington, but he was persuaded by General George B. McClellan to use the Peninsula approach. Accordingly, McClellan was given a portion of the Army of the Potomac, which he had helped create. The first troops arrived at Fort Monroe in March 1862, with McClellan joining them on April 2.

The Confederate leaders, too, had vision and foresight. In the war's first year General John B. Magruder was given the responsibility of defending this region which he saw as an invasion route. He could perform a major service to the southern cause by blocking this route, and for this purpose extended a defensive line across the Peninsula.

One of the early engagements of the War, the Battle of Big Bethel, had already been fought some 15 miles southeast of Yorktown. On April 10, 1861, Confederate troops successfully challenged a Union Force operating from Fort Monroe (City of Hampton) at the cost of 76 casualties for the North and 8 for the South.

Later, when Magruder was building his first Peninsula line, he anchored his left flank at Yorktown making use of existing Revolutionary war embankments which he improved and strengthened. The line spanned the Peninsula, uniting with and using the Warwick River, then following its course past Mulberry Island to the James. Magruder knew the terrain and how to utilize it. In strengthening his defenses he made use of existing dams and built others to back the water up in small streams to flood the low lands and offer more impassable barriers between the dams. The dams he fortified with earthworks and troops. These defenses, some contended, would have been stronger if Magruder had had more and better engineers.

Initially, Magruder had only 11,000 men to hold the entire line of twelve miles and the situation was already provoking heated discussion in Richmond. General Robert E. Lee saw the need to reinforce Magruder's line while General Joseph E. Johnston insisted that this line be abandoned and the troops concentrated with others in a closer defense of Richmond. President Davis sat as an arbiter. Lee's ideas prevailed and by May 1, Confederate strength was 36,000. Ironically, Johnston was given command of the Yorktown line, replacing Magruder, on the 14th of April. The latter was given the command of the right sector of the line.

McClellan, lacking the dash of so many of his contemporaries, first made a thorough reconnaissance of the Yorktown line and then deemed a siege preferable to penetration and exploitation despite his 112,000 men. General Fitz-John Porter was designated director of siege operations and work on fortifications began immediately. Meanwhile, Magruder, and later Johnston, kept improving the Confederate defenses. Confederate organization, with Johnston in command placed Magruder on the right, James Longstreet in the center, and Daniel H. Hill on the left at Yorktown. The reserve near Williamsburg was commanded by Gustavus W. Smith. Most of these were names destined to become more famous as the Civil War progressed. McClellan had Samuel P. Heintzelman on his right, Erasmus D. Keyes on the left and a composite of artillery and cavalry in reserve.

The rainy weather, frequently the case in war, favored the defenders. Magruder's dams turned small streams into major barriers. Despite the weather and southern opposition the Union troops made advances, and prepared more positions. Minor forays served no greater purpose than giving men combat experience and breaking the monotony of the siege. The most serious Union threat came on April 16 when an effort was made to force the Confederates to halt their work on the defenses, to silence their fire, and to gain control of Dam No. 1 near Lee's Mill. The major result here was merely a more stubborn defense.

At one point, in a balloon operated by Professor Thaddeus Lowe, General Fitz-John Porter made a flight for observation purposes and when the moorings broke, drifted over the Confederate lines. Before Confederate fire could be brought to bear, the Union observers were favored by a changing wind carrying them to the safety of their own lines. This was another early step in the development of aerial reconnaissance.

Despite harassing fire, McClellan's troops slowly advanced their works. For artillery to be most effective, even today, it is generally massed for firing in order to get the most shells on the target in the least time possible. McClellan withheld his fire as much as the tactical situation permitted, hoping to follow heavy barrages with infantry advances. Scheduling a full scale attack for May 6, McClellan planned his

major effort in the area between Yorktown and the headwaters of the Warwick River. The plan called for Union gunboats to give supporting fire from the York River. Also, a feint was to be made at Lee Hall (to the west) and, if the opportunity presented itself, this was to develop into major action.

McClellan, to the irritation of some, always insisted on thoroughness in planning and preparation, and the Peninsular Campaign was no exception. But he overestimated his foe's strength and suddenly Johnston forfeited the ground as untenable. As early as April 30, Johnston had planned a withdrawal to take effect May 3, but muddy roads delayed the action a day. Around midnight of May 3 the heavy guns ceased their diverting fire, were spiked and left behind by the retreating soldiers. By dawn of the 4th, Yorktown was ready for Union occupation.

The Confederate withdrawal was well planned and executed. A mile east of Williamsburg, Magruder had previously prepared another line with positions, hinging for the most part on larger Fort Magruder. Johnston elected to delay the Union pursuit here. In the afternoon of the 4th the epilogue to the Peninsular Campaign began as the Battle of Williamsburg which lasted into the following day. This was a pitched battle, intense in its latter stages. At the end of the 5th there were 1,600 Confederate, and 2,300 Union, casualties. The following day Johnston declined to resume the action but marched toward Richmond as had been his original intention. McClellan did not mount a pursuit. The time bought during the Siege on Yorktown and at Williamsburg undoubtedly delayed the assault on Richmond and gave the Confederates a needed interval to assemble and organize the forces that beat McClellan back from the gates of the city and thwarted the Union's Peninsular Campaign.

We can be grateful today that these operations left the Peninsula, Yorktown especially, with so few physical scars. The town escaped heavy destruction and posterity has been, and will continue to be, the benefactor. The reminders of those trying times are the earthworks that remain scattered over the Peninsula and are in abundance around Yorktown.

Today there are numerous existing Civil War fortifications, some very well preserved in the Park area, especially at Yorktown. There is, too, a National Cemetery, established in 1866, with some 2,200 interments, mostly of Union dead. Nearby there is the site of a small Confederate burial ground of undetermined size. At Jamestown and along Colonial Parkway in the Jamestown area are a number of Confederate positions built largely in 1861 when the line of the James River was being fortified with the thought that Union forces might drive on Richmond using this natural water route. These positions saw little or no action in the war.